

## *Free Will*

We must first ask a metaphysical question: what is free will, and is there, or could there be, such a thing? If there could be no such thing, there is no problem. If free will is possible then we face the second question, of whether persons or human beings possess it. We may, of course, decide that the only reason we believe in its existence is because we have discovered it in human beings, but the questions are separate.

A will is 'free' if it is not subject to prior causal influences (unless it wishes to be). Some versions of Quantum Theory entail the existence of uncaused events at a sub-atomic level, but freedom in physics does not concern free will if it is merely random. We are interested in uncaused *controllers* of events, which seems to require a will. Apart from humanity, we have no evidence of such a thing in nature. Outside of space-time, we can conceive of supernatural minds which are free in this way, of which the obvious example is **God**. The Greek gods were said to 'bow to necessity', so they were powerful, but not fully free, and maybe a single supreme God also has limited choices. If, however, the universe has a beginning, and a Creator, then the mind of this Creator seems to need free will, to create the necessary causal laws. Such a God is spoken of as 'the first cause'. If we were confident that such a Creator existed, that would be a strong reason to believe in the existence of free will.

If we look for evidence of free will in human beings, there is no consensus about what we find. The evidence concerns a range of **subjective impressions**, our capacity to reason, and moral responsibility. Although the scope of human actions is limited, the scope of choice seems infinite; you could, for example, choose (but fail) to eat the moon. If we assume that actions arise from desires and beliefs (like a desire for cheese, and a belief that it is in the fridge), it still seems that some further trigger is needed to act. You can't guarantee that someone who desires cheese will therefore open the fridge. The final trigger for action seems to be a distinctive psychological event. It also seems that there is some higher level of thought that monitors choices, so they can be vetoed at the last moment. Even the best of reasons for action still needs a final decision, which feels particularly clear if two good reasons pull in different directions. Thus it is said that we only have to introspect to see that we are obviously free.

Our ability to **think rationally** is seen as particularly good grounds for believing in free will. If our ability to think is not fully free, then every train of thought will be constrained by some prior causes, probably hidden from us. But this is contrary to the very concept of rational thought, which must be open to correction by rival reasons. Since we can always change an opinion because of a reason, our rational thinking not only has to be free, but is seen to be free, whenever we are not lazy, but make the effort to get it right. If we do simple arithmetic, it is obvious that the thinking is not controlled by some inner hidden causes. A mind must rise above its underlying causal network if it is to doggedly track the truth. It is even claimed that the only freedom we ever experience is our submission to good reasons.

A third aspect of thought that seems to imply free will is our sense of **moral responsibility**, in ourselves and in others. We praise people for a benevolent action, but not for being tall, because we take them to have chosen the action. If we thought the action resulted from brainwashing or from fear, our praise would diminish or vanish. Our praise becomes strongest when we think the benevolence has been fully chosen, perhaps even in defiance of brainwashing or fear. In the clearest cases it seems outrageous to give the credit to external causes, when the deed so obviously originates within the person. None of this, it is said, makes sense if people cannot make wholly free choices, and it seems obvious that they often do so. Introspecting our own actions is said to produce similar observations.

Opponents of free will reject or reinterpret this evidence. Feeling free is an illusion, it is said; we can respond to reasons just as we respond to physical obstacles, without total freedom; and we can hold a person responsible as we might hold a dog responsible (as the principle cause) without assuming free will. Evidence is also offered that counts the other way. If we have free will we might expect to have full control (whenever we wish) of every aspect of mental life, but this does not seem to be the case. Our minds are full of emotions, fantasies, memories and trivia that are uninvited and won't go away. Even important thoughts and decisions **just appear** in the mind, unexplained. We can, of course, decide to think about a specific topic (think about polar bears, now!), but the sudden choice of a particular topic may be just as puzzling. You can will something, but can you will to will it, or will to will to will it? Something beyond our control always gets it started. Recent neuroscience has also found triggers of action occurring in the brain prior to any conscious awareness, which throws doubt on our conscious feeling of choice as evidence for free will.

Three main theories emerge from this: **libertarianism**, determinism, and compatibilism. Libertarians make free choice the first assumption of thought, even if what underlies it in the brain is inexplicable. Much mental life is obviously guided by external causes, but the option of full control is always available, when the choice is important, or the aim is to be rational. There may even be a different type of causation ('agent causation') which only occurs when events arise from the decisions of persons. **Determinism** is a view that the march of all causal processes is inevitable and necessary, and the future can (in principle) be predicted from the present situation. Deniers of free will say that this cosmic determinism must include mental causes, because we would otherwise count as supernatural beings. Even determinists normally reject 'fatalism', which implies that we have no control at all. Determinists say we should attend to what we can (and cannot) control, rather than whether we are ultimately 'free'. Another dimension is added by 'social determinism', which says our decisions are far more social or political, and less individual, than we think.

The **compatibilist** view claims that there is a middle way. Since the origins of acts of will are too obscure to be labelled 'free', we should consider what sorts of freedom are obvious and desirable, and ask whether we have them. We all want freedom from external constraint (such as having your hands tied). More important is to enlarge our range of genuine available choices, and then feel in maximum control of our own actions. We can criticise and reject social influences, bad reasons, unwanted emotions and previous mistakes, provided we make the effort. If a decision arises consciously from our inmost character, and is successfully executed, then we are 'free', because that is the only freedom of will which is available to us.